

STATEMENT OF
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SUBMITTED TO
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO
H. R. 2716
THE HOMELESS VETERANS ASSISTANCE ACT OF 2001

AND
H. R. 936
THE HEATHER FRENCH HENRY HOMELESS VETERANS ASSISTANCE ACT

Washington, DC

September 20, 2001

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the 1.9 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, I appreciate the opportunity to submit our views concerning issues that affect the lives and futures of many veterans, the misery of homelessness. The VFW is strongly committed to issues that are relevant to addressing veterans' homelessness and practical initiatives to assist as many veterans as possible to return to their families, stable employment and good health.

The VFW believes that any legislative initiative to assist homeless veterans must be measurable and obtainable if it is going to be successful in bringing about significant aid and assistance to our nations' homeless veterans. Any legislative action must be fully funded and supported to be successful. This is a critical item that cannot be taken lightly. Any program that receives federal funding for homeless veterans must be held accountable for achieving clearly defined results in their performance of assistance and prevention for our veterans. The only attention given to prevention has been an afterthought. The call of alarm is always sounded after the veteran has become homeless, not when the veteran is on the verge of becoming homeless. The VFW views prevention as important to stopping the problem before it becomes a reality and currently has never received the attention that we feel it deserves.

The plight of the homeless veteran was reintroduced to the public and made critical again, thanks to the efforts of Mrs. Heather French Henry. During her reign as Miss America 2000, major ground was gained in this endeavor and a new reenergized focus was created. Her hard work and dedication in this issue has allowed homeless veterans to be seen as our brothers and sisters again, instead of derelicts on the streets to be avoided.

The VFW also sees the importance in how the special needs of homeless veterans are addressed. The homeless veterans community suffers at a greater rate than any other group in this arena. Veterans who are chronically mentally ill or suffering from substance abuse problems are at the greatest risk. The VA estimates that approximately 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from some form of mental illness, ranging from schizophrenia to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In this lies the most challenging aspect of the entire program, continued follow-up. Because of the threat of relapse, constant follow-up and observation is required that could entail years of continued care. Premature discharge from programs due to lack of space or funding is not an acceptable excuse for failing these veterans. Therefore, treatment must be an ongoing process that provides a vehicle for recovery and potential independent living. The VFW stresses that any action taken by the Committee focus on the importance of protecting the mentally ill from shortsighted decisions that will do more harm than good.

In addition to this, at least 50 percent also suffer from some form of substance abuse through addictions to legal and illegal drugs and alcohol. Section 10 of H.R. 2716 address the importance of establishing a demonstration program to assist in providing housing for veterans who are recovering from alcohol or substance use disorders. The VA will be able to do this through making grants available to eligible entities that in turn will provide independent housing units and group houses for the veterans to reside. This will enable the veterans to be in an environment that will be conducive to rehabilitation and recovery. With set rules and policies, the opportunity for success will be greatly increased. A careful evaluation of the mental health care programs provided to our veterans must be seen as vital and funded as such. The VFW views these types of programs as viable solutions and supports a proactive agenda over a reactive one.

Another important measure that must be addressed is the vital role the local community plays in the success or failure of homeless projects. Efforts must be concentrated at the community level to be able to assist and help train the maximum number of individuals possible to improve the methods of disseminating information

between all of the shelters, outreach programs and providers involved. Lack of communication and unnecessary duplication of efforts not only wastes resources, but robs the veteran of the most valuable resources available; time and hope.

Another program that must be addressed is the special need of dental care within the homeless community. This is not only a pain of homelessness, but also a barrier to employment and assistance. The ability to smile without fear of rejection and ridicule is a valuable tool towards overcoming the obstacles of succeeding where they had previously failed. A price tag cannot be placed on a smile and self-confidence. The health concerns as well as the physical limitations of poor dental care will only act as another limiting force to prevent the veteran from the realization of a return to self-sufficiency.

The VFW also supports and encourages the establishment of a VA Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans as outlined in section 4 of H.R. 936. By creating a venue for the veterans organizations to have a greater voice in the implementing of ideas and options, the opportunity for developing an open dialogue will be encouraged, thus allowing for the development of real and lasting solutions.

Mr. Chairman, the VFW is very supportive of the intent of both the *Homeless Veterans Assistance Act of 2001* (H. R. 2716) as introduced by Chairman Smith and the *Heather French Henry Homeless Veterans Assistance Act* (H. R. 936) as introduced by Representative Evans to provide assistance and services that are vital to the care and well being of homeless veterans. Yet, whatever legislature is produced must maintain the goals of assistance and prevention be measurable, obtainable and most of all realistic.

Mr. Chairman, the VFW looks forward to working with you and the full Committee, in eliminating this national embarrassment. With support from the administration, Congress and co-ordination between federal and local community homeless providers, we will succeed.

This concludes my testimony.